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What the Mexican Conference Really Means

It Represents Desire of the People, Deprived of Human Rights, to Re-establish Themselves in the Scheme of Social Evolution

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IN 1522 Cortez pinned the province of Mexico to Spain with a sword. In 1821 Mexico took the sword in her own hand and cut out of the original fabric of national sovereignty, which was all Spain had left her of her three hundred years' servitude, the uniform of a representative government. In September, 1915, Mexico, without any authorized executive, without any properly constituted legislative body, with no more than 15 per cent. of her population educationally qualified, but with that uniform, a little tattered, perhaps, but still buttoned bravely about her breast, is sitting in conference with the greatest of the Americas.

Of all the incidents that fell in between those two dates none is of such historic significance as those which lead up to the conference at New London, in New England, the original cradle of representative government in the New World. It has been called ostensibly to consider one of the breaks in the fabrics of Mexican sovereignty impartially referred to by First Chief Carranza as "the Columbus incident," but the incident itself is almost overlaid by considerations which may result from it, considerations of the utmost importance not only to the two republics, but to all Latin America. "It ought," said Secretary Lane, the Chairman of the American Commission, "to indicate the line of political direction in the New World for the next thousand years."

Lane is a strong, easy man, who never muffs and never makes the mistake of reading his own psychology into an

alien situation. Dr. John Mott, the second member, is much the same sort of man Lane is, with more velvet. He is probably the first man ever appointed to a commission of this kind whose approach to public questions is frankly ethical rather than political. If Judge George Gray, the third member of the triad, gives the impression of being less of a personality, it is only because he has tucked his personality out of the way to give freer play to his remarkable gift for administrative arbitration, in the exercise of which he has a long and successful record.

But neither of these gentlemen nor the three Mexican Commissioners who will be mentioned presently have the case entirely in their hands. The real protagonists at New London are the 15 per cent. of Mexico gathered to a head under Venustiano Carranza, the 15,000,000 they are attempting to bring into line with modern national requirements, the present Administration and the temper of the American people.

So far as the attitude of the Administration has revealed itself, it has been for a policy of constructive conciliation. It has all been in keeping with the soundest Americanism, in recognizing the right of a people to manage their own affairs, even when they aren't doing it as well as we think we could do it for them. It has clearly seen the obligation of our pre-eminence among American nations, and measured the cost of maintaining it against the relatively greater price of a traditional "satisfaction." Very little study of the Mexican situation is necessary to realize that no mistake in the approach could compare with the irreparably greater mistake of violating the democratic principle of international arbitration.

Secretary Lane found the touchstone of sanity in his welcoming address when he said that this conference must be begun not only in the realization that we two countries are neighbors, but that we are always going to be neighbors. We must learn to be good neighbors, not only because it will be much more comfortable but because we can neither of us afford to have anybody take more interest in Mexico than we take. And the Administration is in a better position than any of us to know what interest is being taken and what it will mean to us.

The attitude of the American people toward Mexico is characterized by a commendable absence of animus and a general ignorance of things Mexican which would be appalling if it were not kept company by equal ignorance of so many things that we really ought to know about. It fails most in not taking account of the Mexicans as a dislocated people.

When Spain established herself in the country the respective tribes occupied a definite place in social evolution. They had a native religion, a fruitful relation to the land, and a Government of their own adoption. These are three indispensable items of normal development, and these three the Spaniard wholly disrupted. No doubt Spain hoped to make over the free military democracy of Anahuac on the model of the European feudal system a system fitted neither to the temperament nor the capacity of the aboriginal Mexican. What she did was to leave them a people dislocated from all their natural habits, without any incentive to conform to the new system, and kept from any sort of knowledge or freedom to acquire any sense of their social direction. Under these circumstances it is not possible that the manners and morals of the peon class, as they present themselves to the American observer, can be a reliable index of peon character.

To take but one item, so often quoted to the discredit of the peon, the reaction of this dislocation on the problem of marriage. Under Aztec rule marriage was strictly regulated and the standard of sex morality was higher than that of the Conquistadores. Common report is probably right in putting the present standard very low among the working classes, but when the young peon wishes to marry now he is confronted with two alternatives. He can have a civil marriage, which his church has taught him to regard as no marriage at all, or a church wedding for which the fee is practically prohibitive. If scruple is stronger in him than impulse, he borrows money from his employer, pays the priest, and enters upon a condition of debt which amounts to slavery. How many of our own young working people, obliged to legitimatize their marriages at such a price, would decide to dispense with any ceremony whatever? Yet by just such frustrations of his natural impulse toward thrift and decency has the character of the

Mexican working man been debased. Without knowledge of these disintegrating social factors, no judgment of the Mexican as a neighbor and possible ally has any value whatever. Back of every problem of the revolution, back of the revolution itself, lies this problem of dislocation.

Historically, the Mexicans are a hard working, land loving, peaceable people. Current impression that they are given to revolt as the sparks fly upward fails to realize what a large part hunger, homelessness, low wages, and lack of confidence play in men's willingness or unwillingness to fight. Personally, the fear of those to whom the republic is dear is that they will stop fighting too soon; as soon as they are eased of their intolerable discomfort. When General Blanco, after the earlier victories, began parceling out the land, most of those who were fortunate to get a piece of it resigned from the army. Prosperity never made any people warlike. It only makes it possible when they do fight to go on fighting longer. But when any people has actually more to hope for from war—more things to eat, more to look forward to and live for—then revolution may become a habit. For a long time Mexico has been in that condition. Her short, sporadic revolts are simply the index of the desperation of the people and the short shift of their supplies. Because they are fighting for relief, they snatch up any leader that comes handy, Zapata, Madero, Villa, just as the French peasants caught up bill hooks and scythes when no better weapons were to be had. The extent to which they will support the Carranzista program depends on the edge it has to cut a path for them back to their normal relation to the land and to one another.

It is difficult to say just how conscious the revolt is among the 15,000,000. The working population is in a state of stampede. They have been herded away from their natural human rights and instincts as long as they can stand it, and now they must get back to where they started from or die. The success that any provisional government can have in Mexico will depend on its ability to understand and satisfy this struggle of a vast population to re-establish itself in the scheme of social evolution. On our ability to sympathize and assist at such a reinstatement depends our preeminence among American republics—and, incidentally, much of our commercial prestige and our chance to reform

international law along more democratic lines. No matter to what frame the Government of Mexico is attached, the warp of it must be like the blanket the native woman weaves, tied at the other end to her body. As she sways to her work, it is tightened or relaxed and the pattern of representative government appears.

The Administration knows this. The 15 per cent. knows it, the Commissioners know it. If the American people fail to know it they will miss their cue more completely than they have ever missed it in the course of their history.

Every South American republic is made up of elements similar to those which give so much trouble in Mexico, a small, highly intelligent, Latinized class in whose hands are the balance of property and power, and a numerically larger group of tribesmen. They are all more or less successfully engaged in the same problem of building up out of these elements a self-governing, self-sustaining middle class. South American distrust of the United States has been very largely allayed by our refusal of the obvious opportunity for territory and political conquest which the Mexican situation lays open to us.

There remain still the questions of trade and military alliances which it will be important for all the Americas to make to meet the reorganization of world-trade at the close of the European war. It is not too much to say that the general lines of those alliances, the spirit in which they will be approached by Latin America, are being determined in the commission now meeting at New London.

The questions which formally come before the Commissioners are five in number:

The withdrawal of our troops from Mexico.

The future policing of the border.

The American claim for damage and confiscation.

The return of American investors to their properties.

The terms upon which Americans can continue to go into Mexico for the development of her natural resources.

But the determination of all these points depends on the ability of the Carranzistas to carry out any agreements which may be made. They are not—Senors Cabrera, Bonillas, and

Pani—Commissioners of a legally elected Government. With an 85 per cent. illiteracy it is unlikely that anything like representative suffrage can be expected from Mexico for another fifty years. But to say that a country has not representative government is not necessarily to say that it has not that form of government which is, at the present, best for it. With the bias of the present Administration toward what is human and common-sensible, it is in order to inquire how far the Carranzistas represent the intimate needs and deep-rooted tendencies of the Mexican people. For the proper handling of the border problem there must be much more arrived at than the order of the incidents that led up to it. It is not to any game of bluff and bluster that the Joint Commission has sat down, but to search the soul of a nation.

To be in entire sympathy with the purposes of the commission it is necessary to feel perfectly certain that the nation has a soul, and that the ferment in which we find it is generic, rectifying to the national spirit. It has worked for years; it may spume and work again. It would be pleasant to think that it is even now beginning to clarify, and that the country is so soon and so cheaply pacified. But with no disrespect to the First Chief of the present revolution it is still possible that the national ideal may take some other form at another time. New wine always needs new bottles. We must deal, we must learn to think of ourselves as dealing, in Mexico with a spirit rather than a party. If we would be saved future fumblings and embarrassment we must commit ourselves not to a man, but to the thing which for the hour he represents, the destiny of the Mexican people.

It is significant to note that the three men to whom have been intrusted the conduct of the Mexican interest are all very much of the type we would have chosen ourselves. They are all "business men" rather than politicians—two of them engineers and one a railroad man. Señor Luis Cabrera, Secretary of the Treasury, distinguished for his handling of the disorganized fiscal system of Mexico, might easily have acquired that intent, far-directed look somewhere below Twenty-third Street in New York. Señor Ignacio Bonillas, holding the portfolio of Communications and Public Works, did acquire not only his engineering

education, but his wife and his accent in Boston, U. S. A. Señor Alberto J. Pani is the President of the National Railway Lines of Mexico, and looks it, done into Spanish, of course, and young enough to excuse his not yet having attained the girth with which American newspaper cartoons invariably credit a railway magnate. Really a very pretty man whose bright, reflective eyes hint without revealing his extraordinary acquaintance with the physical phases of every plan of national betterment. These are the men who not only believe in the ability of Mexico to maintain her place among the sovereign nations of the world, but expect to have a hand in the process.

They offer as the credentials of their party some really amazing achievements in practical rehabilitation; so many miles of railroad rebuilt, such and such harbors cleared, lighthouse and coast protection all in working order, a more effective postal system. These are the sort of things we expect from the 15 per cent. They are testimonials to the quality and efficiency of the Carranza Cabinet. No one who talks with the Mexican Commissioners can doubt that they have come to their work in a spirit of high intelligence tempered by the sobriety of practice. But it is not in these we must look for the guarantee of their ability to prevent violations of our border, protect the lives of our citizens and advance the interests of American investors in Mexico. The real touchstone of the Carranzistas is, as it is with all Governments, their handling of the 15,000,000. The body of Mexican citizenry must be replanted in its native environment, its roots must strike and spread. It must be made to branch and grow.

We have to look to the land policy of the Carranzistas to find corroboration of their claim really to represent the majority. We have to look for something in their practice of reform that connects it with the native tendency of the Mexicans as a people. We find it in their recognition of the tribal element, in the communal use of public utilities.

The peon class of Mexico has no sense of private property in land. It is difficult for us who inherit ten or fifteen centuries of land-owning habits to realize that they never had any. No such thing as ownership of land in fee was ever heard of in ancient Anahuac, which is not so much

more ancient than Plymouth Colony. No office or man owned any land, title to it did not even pass by conquest. It was as free as air; like air, you used as much or as little of it as answered your necessity.

There was a kind of relationship between the tribe and the particular land in which it was bred, like the relation of wild animals to their habitat and plants to their climatic zone. It was as natural as that and as difficult to eradicate. Descendants of generations of dispossessed races, as we are, we have failed to understand that not the peon's house is his home, but the mountain, the valley. When they want a fleeing criminal in Mexico, if he is of the peon class, they do not spend much time looking for him. They go and sit down in his tribal home and wait. Sooner or later, as swallows return to the eaves, he must come back to it.

It is plain from this that just a piece of land anywhere isn't going to solve the unrest of the peon. He must be returned to his tierra. And because he hasn't any property sense of land, when he gets his allotment it must be made inalienable. Otherwise somebody will take it away from him as easily as Spain did.

That the new land policy of the Carranzistas takes account of all these things is the best indication it gives of achieving permanence. Nor is the communal element neglected. Wherever possible communal lands are being rewhere they have legally passed to private owners they are stored to the pueblos, where these have been stolen, and repurchased by the State and restored. Mexico is never going to be pacified by the sword. Spain tried it and failed. Diaz tried to do it with a political despotism. History and social science are both on the side of Mr. Carranza's attempt to substitute a plowshare and a spade.

The Carranzistas hope for a great many reforms beside the land reform—they hope to accomplish a good many of them by virtue of an element in Mexico which they understand because they were born to it. But only a very big American, like Franklin K. Lane, can understand it. Almost anybody can know a lot of facts about Villa and Carranza and the Columbus incident, but it takes a statesman to grasp a simple principle of human society, such as that man is an animal who, in his natural state, does better for

himself living and working in groups. In normal human society group activities are higher than any individual achievement. This is not true of us, who are made up of the remnants of other Old World groups. Our public policies are more hesitant, our public business less efficient, our public art, our public sanitation are all on a lower level than the individual effort of great numbers of our citizens. But in Mexico on her own this was not so. Every public building was nobler than any private house. Communal activity reached a plane higher in several points than the Europe of that day.

This is one of the things Spain disrupted. But you can't really eradicate a genuine racial tendency like that, any more than you can get the kinks out of an African's wool. You can absolutely bank on Mexico united and functioning as a people doing things that no Mexican would ever think of doing for himself. That is why people who know Mexico feel more hopeful of the situation than those who only know Mexicans.

I do not mean to suggest that all the work of the commission will be carried on in high C like that. The Carranzistas have a well-defined program which has a definite relation to the problems of the border and the settlement of American claims. They are also fully alive to the international bearing of any entente which may be reached by them in conjunction with the American Commissioners. Foreign investors have suffered the same damage and inconvenience during the revolution. European nations have served notice that as soon as they have disposed of more pressing matters at home they will attend to their Mexican interests. It will be every way to the advantage of Mexico to have established a world precedent with the United States which Europe will think twice about overriding. And on the other hand, the noblesse oblige of nations to some extent compels the United States to take a world view; not to press the personal instance too much.

The policing of the border is, in fact, almost the only intimate concern of the United States, and even that has to be conducted with one eye on the other border of Mexico, where Guatemala is feeling out the limit of forbearance. We don't hear much of Guatemala in the newspapers, but

it is no secret in Mexico that First Chief Carranza is merely holding that matter in abeyance as being a little more in the family and susceptible of less public adjustment.

The Carranzistas have undertaken many reforms in which we have almost no interest, certainly no right to meddle, such as the reform of marriage and the guarantee of religious freedom. They even contemplate the—for them—wild radicalism of inviting all religions into Mexico so that every citizen may choose the one which pleases him. They have attempted many things which should work directly to the advantage of foreign investors, such as a reform of the civil, penal and commercial codes more in line with modern methods, and a reorganization of the judicial procedure to rid it of the delays and indirection of which Americans in Mexico so frequently complain. They propose to abolish the obnoxious jefe politico which tied local affairs to the central political powers.

Now, anybody can see that a regime which favors a free, reasonably paid, land-owning population is not only going to be more comfortable for Americans working there, but it is also going to react immeasurably in favor of Americans who live at home producing bathtubs, electric heaters, millinery, phonographs,, cultivators and moving pictures to sell to anybody who will buy. Honesty compels me to admit that there isn't any wild rush yet on the part of the peons for bathtubs, but they are strong for phonographs and cinemas and farming implements.

The items of the Constitutionalists' program at which vested interests take alarm are, of course, the reform of mining and land laws, and the land tax system. Mexico in the past has been not only the land of poco tiempo, but the paradise of special privilege. And the man who has looked upon Mexico as a place to make 25 per cent. on his investment is the one who thinks that the only thing we can do is to go in there and run things ourselves.

Such people are always in a hurry. They don't know that a reconstructed Mexico will be any the worse for their business, but they don't want to take time to readjust themselves, to learn to operate under a new system. In their hurry these absentee investors are supported by the Ameri-

cans who live in Mexico and work their properties themselves, who, without having any particular quarrel with the revolutionists are impatient of the delays and vexations which keep them from their means of making a living. These people differ in their ideas of how the pacification of Mexico can be best accomplished, but they all agree in one thing, they want it done quickly, and if that is the quickest way they are willing it should be done with a sandbag. Their chief objection to the Carranza way is that it will take time. And to the prevailing American cult of right now this appears a reasonable objection.

We hear a great deal of the disqualification of the Mexican temperament for dealing with national values, its incontinence, its quick shifts of enthusiasm. But there is a much greater menace to the situation in the American temperament, with its impatience of delay, its refusal to deal with conditions a little less than obvious.

It is true that the terms on which mines and plantations can be worked in Mexico are not going to be quite the same under the Carranzistas. The whole tenor of the new laws, too complex to go into in detail, is to make it unprofitable to hold unworked mining claims and uncultivated lands. This is true not only for foreign investors, but for their own capitalists also. Wages and taxes are both going to be higher. Wages and taxes always go up with the process of nationalization. And whether or not the present regime maintains itself, it is highly desirable that the process of nationalization should go on in Mexico.

It must always be borne in mind that what has been going on there is an economic revolution. The Constitutionalists are men who have learned by heart the lesson that national wealth doesn't necessarily imply national welfare. That was the mistake Diaz made. That he made it with a degree of sincerity did not keep him from the unpleasant consequences of his people finding out that it was a mistake. There are not wanting signs that even America is not as satisfied with her apportionment of wealth and welfare as she used to be. It will come as a shock in some quarters, but it has to be admitted that First Chief Carranza and his compadres don't want our system foisted upon Mexico, because they jolly well don't approve of it.

That is the situation before the commission at New London. Of other elements that enter, Mexican jealousy of their national sovereignty as affected by the presence of a large body of troops within their border, American resentment of the occasion which sent them there, the pressure of private interests, the tendency to play politics—for all these things do enter to some degree—we can only hope that they will not rise high enough to confuse the main issue. It is too early to predict an outcome. Any day some new phases of the border problem may bring about that coalition of forces which will put an entirely new complexion on international feeling. In the meantime the best thing that the country at large can do is to entertain toward the six Commissioners and their undertaking a serious and informed attention.

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